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## **The Texas Catholic Church and the Mexican Catholic Persecution of the 1920s and 30s**

BY JASON SURMILLER

During the 1910s, 20s and 30s the Mexican Catholic Church was mercilessly persecuted by the Mexican Government. In response to this Mexican crisis Texas and America bishops led by Archbishop Arthur J. Drossaerts of San Antonio sprang into unified action to save the Mexican Church. One of the tangible results of this unity was the creation of the American Bishops' Committee for Mexican Relief, originally headed by Archbishop Michael Joseph Curley of Baltimore. Through this organization, and others like it, they created a Mexican seminary in America, accepted Mexican Catholic refugees, and lobbied and criticized various American administrations to intercede for religious freedom. They did this not only to save Mexican Catholics but because the American bishops' feared that this communist inspired threat against religion would push into America. Through their work to help Mexico's Catholics Drossaerts and the American bishops actively flexed their political muscle. Yet, always in the vein of being faithful Americans, who wanted to spread the ideas of freedom of religion, speech and conscience. In many ways, Drossaerts lobbied for American ideas like a politician as much as he argued for the freedom of the Church as a bishop. In other words, it is difficult to see where his Catholic faith ends and their belief in American ideas begins. In fact, the two identities appear completely intertwined since he, along with his colleagues, wanted to be viewed as Americans, a logical response to the historic anti-Catholic activities of their fellow Americans that despised the Church.

This merger became so thorough it may be impossible to divide one from the other and really understand the mind of an American bishop like Drossaerts. However, this strategy helped the Church viewed for so long as an alien presence, become apart of the American political, social and religious tapestry. Therefore, when we look at the bishops reacting to the

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Mexican persecution, we see men trying to protect the Church by advocating that Mexico adopt American ideas for their government. This stance clearly shows how American the Church had become.

Now the roots of this Mexican Church/State conflict began in the 1910s when the country's Government and Church once again found themselves at loggerheads. However, the tension between the Church and Mexican state had existed before the birth of the country in 1824. The liberals, followers of the Enlightenment, who helped break Mexico away from Spain, hated the special privileges of the priests and bishops. For the liberals, the Church represented Spain and its centuries long domination of Mexico. Therefore, following in the footsteps of other Enlightenment regimes, one of their chief goals for a liberated Mexico was to break the social and political power of the Church. For nearly the next hundred years, the Church fought a losing struggle against the liberals. Although for a short time in the early 1900's, the Church had a resurgence of political power by taking up the ideas of Catholic Social Justice in Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. This encyclical proclaimed that the Church and upper classes needed to support and foster the working classes to promote civil harmony. The document went even further than that supporting the idea of the working class attaining property and wealth they could hand down to their descendants. In addition, the encyclical spoke out against the relatively new leftist philosophy of communism. This threw a new ideological wrinkle into the confrontation between the Church and the left, giving the Church the impetus to accuse leftist movements of having communist sympathies.

Following the lead of the papacy and the burgeoning CSJ movement in 1911, the Mexican Church helped to establish the National Catholic party, with the desire to support democratic and republican institutions. Under the party Catholics successfully ran candidates for a couple of years, and began to take on positions of political influence. Unfortunately, for the Church, beginning in 1913, Mexico underwent another violent change in government led by the military with the liberals once again having the chance to target it. Instead of seeing a much more reform body supporting democracy, the left still wrongly saw the autocratic Church of their fathers. However, it took to the middle of 1914 before the liberals strongly reacting to Catholic political gains could start to confiscate property and arrest or banish its clergy. This leftist attack of the Church eventually culminated into the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which re-



inforced and expanded the anti-clerical laws in the Constitution of 1857. Some of the anti-clerical measures enshrined in the Constitution gave the state governments "the power to determine the maximum number of ministers of denominations necessary for local needs." Also, "every religious act of public worship must be performed strictly inside places of public worship, which shall at all times be under government supervision." In addition, the 1917 Constitution nationalized all Church property and proclaimed "religious institutions known as churches...may in no case acquire, hold, or administer real property." Just across the border, these incredibly regressive measures were difficult for American Churchmen to swallow since they operated with so much autonomy. A self-government that they believed Mexico needed to give its own native church. Therefore, in defending the Mexican Church, the American bishops publicly extolled the values of freedom of speech and religion that they believed were universal. However, these ideas were at odds with the traditional teaching of the Church expressed by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Immortale Dei*. So, clearly the American way of life had made inroads into the Church because of either sheer opportunism or true conviction.

While these attacks alone would have been enough to aggravate the American Catholic Church across the border, the Russian Communist revolution of 1917 added an extra and fearful dimension to the Mexican conflict. Because of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Catholic Church just saw the largest country on earth succumb to militant atheism, which brutally attempted to destroy the ancient Russian Orthodox Church. Because of the Bolshevik takeover, communism now bordered traditional Catholic countries in Europe. With Mexico in the midst of its own fall, the American Church found itself uncomfortable close in this war of ideology.

From the Russian communist dictator Joseph Stalin, they understood that the goal of communism was to actively expand its presence worldwide. Against this backdrop, the Catholic Churches in the United States and Mexico no longer saw this as a war against Enlightenment Liberals. It had changed into a fight between the international non-democratic atheistic communist movement and the Catholic Church that supported religious freedom and democratic institutions. The American Church gladly took on the former label in this struggle. Nevertheless, this was a seemingly drastic change from just a few decades ago when it was the autocratic Church against a liberal enlightenment movement of freedom and personal autonomy.



While the Church and Mexican leftist, whether enlightenment or communist inspired, had been locked in a seemingly perpetual conflict before the 1917 constitution, the leftist presidents of Mexico, Venustiano Carranza (1917-20) and Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924), despite their new powers decided to follow a more moderate line in church-state relations and in enforcing the anti-clerical measures of the constitution. Their successor Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), on the other hand, had broke with the new status quo and decided to take a much harder stance against Catholics. The government under his leadership returned to actively harassing the Church, sometimes violently, to push it out of public life and control it by instituting the provisions of the 1917 constitution. The most famous attempt under his administration to suppress Catholics was the Cristero War from 1926-1929. Along with physically fighting the Church, he still pursued other forms of persecution such as closing religious schools, exiling bishops, and seizing church property. A strategy Bishop Christopher Byrne of Galveston, Texas ultimately believed backfired, blaming Mexico's deteriorating economic situation in the late 1920's on their anti-religious laws.

Drossaerts, as one of the main actors of this time, helped to coordinate much of the work done to assist the Mexican Church. Originally born in Berda, the Netherlands in 1862, he was ordained a priest in 1889 in Bois Le Duc, Belgium. The next year he answered the plea of the Archbishop of New Orleans for priests and moved to the archdiocese. He worked there until 1918, after which the Church selected him as the fifth bishop of San Antonio and eventually its first metropolitan archbishop. Shortly after becoming an Archbishop, in April 1927 during the Cristero War, his archdiocese hosted a meeting that he attended with nine exiled Mexican hierarches to discuss the religious crisis in Mexico.

In many ways Drossearts was following in the footsteps of Pius XI who believed that a "war...is now being waged on the Catholic Church" in Mexico fanned by government authorities. He reiterated this sentiment after an audience with Drossaerts, when the Pope had confirmed reports given to him by the Archbishop describing the many kinds of persecution on going in Mexico. Along with the American bishops, the Pope blamed the situation in Mexico on "the spread of Bolshevism." While the bishops in general made the concerns of the Pope their own, they implemented their own strategies on the diocesan and national level to confront the Mexican issue. Drossaerts wrote a scathing letter to his diocesan parishes



in November 1927 announcing that Mexico was becoming “the Bolshevik Russia of the Western Hemisphere.” He went still further comparing the Mexican persecution to those perpetuated by the Ancient Roman Emperors Diocletian and Nero. To spiritually alleviate the suffering of Mexicans, he ordered that after each Mass the parishes recite the *Contra Persecutores Ecclesiae*, three Our Fathers and Hail Marys until the persecution ceased. Additionally in the letter, he lauded the European press for, in his opinion, accurately detailing the events in Mexico and castigated the American press for remaining silent.

Even before Drossaerts’ letter of 1927 to his local Church, the Cristeros War and his meeting with the nine exiled bishops, he welcomed fleeing clerics into Texas. In 1923, he took in the apostolic delegate to Mexico, Monsignor Ernesto Filippi, who Obregon accused of interfering in politics. One of the Monsignor’s apparent offenses was claiming that Obregon objected to the Knights of Columbus taking root in the country. In response to the exile, the then Bishop Drossaerts proclaimed that Obregon had used the same tactics as Lenin and Trotsky. Because of Drossaerts standing and reach, Obregon felt compelled to respond to this charge stating he “will act according to obligations imposed by him by his duty and the law.” In union with the Archbishop of San Antonio, many of the American bishops readily compared Mexico to communist Russia at this time. He, along with other bishops, was also quick to respond against Mexican officials that tried to downplay any kind of persecution.

A few months before the beginning of the Cristeros War in 1926, Drossaerts charged the Mexican government with trying to dechristianize Mexico in imitation of Soviet Russia. Gen. Celestino Gasca, the former Mayor of Mexico City and Director General of Industries in Calles’ administration, refuted those allegations and claimed that the closed religious school would be reopen. Despite this assurance, Drossaerts proclaimed, “Mr. Calles like all tyrants...has set out an army of spies operating even in our own free country.” Later that same year the US Catholic episcopate published a document warning Americans, that Mexico was attacking the foundations of Christian civilization. Possibly in an attempt not to appear political, the bishops said they only decided to speak out against the persecution because Calles had started his own propaganda campaign directed at the US. Drossaerts clearly linked the leftist activity in Mexico with an invasion of America. The



Texas archbishop wanted Americans to be afraid of what was happening in Mexico because it could or was finding its way into the country.

Almost a decade later, Drossaerts was still writing to his parishes warning about the Mexican situation. He claimed that the Mexican Government was godless and only held on to power because of the gun. He wrote that the Mexican Communists wanted to completely wipe out the faith by stealing all the seminaries and make it a crime to train for the priesthood. Additionally, the Archbishop used his priests as surrogates in order to spread the message against the Mexican leftists. In 1934, Rev. Leo V. Murphy spoke to the Men's Club of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, San Antonio, at Drossaerts direction decrying the damage to the Catholic faith by a small minority of Socialists. He told the group that the philosophy of Socialism was foreign to Mexican culture but interestingly enough the priest not only tied Mexican socialism to Stalin but the Fascists strongmen Hitler and Mussolini. He claimed that one of things that all of these dictators had in common was returning to the pagan ideal of the state as a god. While most of his speech dealt specifically with the links between Russia and Mexico the mention of Mussolini in 1934 as a dictator, trying to erase God from the national conscience represented an unusual attack. Especially since the *Southern Messenger*, the Catholic paper of Texas, the year before had lauded the work done by Mussolini in Italy.

Not only did Drossaerts, during the Cristeros War, care for the political welfare of the Mexican Church but also its spiritual. In April 1928, he buried two of its exiled hierarchs, Archbishop Mora y del Rio and Bishop Valdespino. In the homily for the Archbishop, he compared the exiled Mora y del Rio's death to the sacrifice at Calvary and cast Calles as Pontus Pilate. In the funeral oration, he reported that "the bishops have been exiled, the priests shot down like mad dogs in the street." He also pointed to the fact that the Catholics in the US were like the Maccabees, a group of revolutionary Jews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BC that fought the Greeks in order to purify the Jewish Temple. During his homily for Valdespino, he attacked the American government and its attitude toward the persecution in Mexico. In particular, he castigated the US State Department for maintaining good relations with a country that had the blood of innocents on its hands. Unlike other instances where the bishops emphasized their connections with other Americans and sometimes by extension Protestants, alluding to the Maccabees implied the distinctness of Catholics and their



persecution in Mexico because this book is not in the Protestant bible.

Additionally, after their deaths, he engaged in a war of words with the Mexican Consul General Enrique Santibanez. He refuted Santibanez and his government's contention that there was no religious persecution in Mexico and declared, "the program of Bolshevism in Mexico, as in Russia, calls for war against all Christianity, Catholic or Protestant." He mentioned in a letter to Sister Margaret Mary Look that he was "getting to be something of a national celebrity with these funerals of Mexican bishops and the sermons preached" and that he did these so that he could "[seize] upon these occasions in order to stir up public opinion which has been shamefully dormant long enough." In December 1928, he wrote to her again to say that he had taken in eleven exiled Mexican Bishops but was optimistic about the Church's future. Since, he had learned of a meeting between the Mexican Hierarchy and Mexican President Portes Gil and that a famous stigmatized girl from Bavaria prophesied the persecution would soon end unlike in Russia, which was far from peace. Even in private, the Archbishop drew links between events in Russia and Mexico.

As far as physical support, Drossaerts was one of only six other bishops on the Catholic Bishops Commission Inc. for Mexican Relief. They created it in order to defend the Church in Mexico and legally protect the right of religious freedom and the conscience of the Mexican people. Establishing a Mexican Seminary became a chief objective for them. Drossaerts wrote to the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, the Most Reverend Archbishop A. Cicognani, in October 1935, that the Mexican and American bishops did not want to delay the building of an inter-diocesan seminary for Mexican seminarians. He petitioned Pius XI and his delegate to support the project because as of March 1936, they had no mandate for one. Drossaerts explained the importance of the project writing "[y]et would it not be to the everlasting shame of the Church in America if nothing be done to save the Faith of the Catholic Nation across the border." Time in their mind was of the essence and they would put what pressure they could on the Vatican to continue with their plans. This is a clear example of while they may have wanted the Pope's blessing they eagerly spearheaded projects.

The Bishop of Erie, Pa., John Gannon, looking back in 1951, remembered that the Mexican Bishops had asked the American Hierarchy to build it in 1936 after he asked what the American bishops could do to help. The bishops selected land in Montezuma, NM, and spent \$269,000



to buy and renovate the existing buildings on the property. The Pope gave \$5,000 to start the collection drive for the seminary. The Church completed the school in September 1937 and gave it to the Society of Jesus to administer. The Pope named it a Pontifical Seminary, which was an unusual honor. The bishops took on this charge because they clearly believed abandoning Mexico was not an option, if they did communism would triumph there and cross the Rio Grande.

The seminary officially opened September 23, 1937, in Montezuma, NM, with 352 students from 30 different dioceses in Mexico. The rector Ramon Martinez Silva S.J. lauded the seminary as a place where the once fugitive students that had to move from place to place to avoid arrest could now forget about the persecutions. He wrote that the students "only aim is to become the savers of their poor country Mexico, to prepare themselves for the holy priesthood and a life of sacrifices. This life may end with a martyr's death." Much of the money to maintain the seminary came from the American bishops and faithful but the Mexican hierarchy paid at least \$70,000 to get the students from Mexico into New Mexico. The way the Mexican and American bishops described the seminary was that they intended to build a training base right across the border to spiritually reinvade Mexico. The Church not only took care of seminarians and the exiled bishops but in 1926, the Diocese of El Paso took in refugee nuns in an old school built by the Sisters of Loretto at the Foot of the Cross.

This concern for the seminary stemmed in part from the bishops belief in the power of education. In fact, the situation in Mexico possibly made the bishops take a closer look at education in America. Bishop Byrne of Galveston provides an example of this. He was a native of Missouri and served all of his time as a priest there, until appointed to the Texas diocese in 1918. In his Christmas Midnight Mass homily of 1936, he touched on Communism in Russia and Mexico and accused the American public schools of spreading the vile doctrine. He believed the education of the state only benefitted atheists or free thinkers because the schools did not provide religious education. While the Catholic Church is famous for having its own independent education system, it did not teach all Catholics and Byrne, at least, became sensitive to what they were learning in public schools. Because in the mind the bishops schools could either convert children to communism like they were in Mexico or be a way for the Church to save young minds.

As the head bishop in Texas and a leading hierarch in America, Archbishop Drossaerts used whatever power he had to alert the rest of America to the danger of communism brewing south of the border in Mexico. The Mexican authorities, from its presidents on down, certainly took note of his efforts and responded to him demonstrating how effective he was in alerting the rest of America about the persecution. Even the *New York Times* reported what was happening in Mexico and the work ongoing in San Antonio. He worked with and led other bishops in America to help create real institutions that served the Mexican Catholic Church and laid the groundwork for Mexican priests to evangelize their country once again. He faithfully attempted to serve his Church as a loyal son and took the initiative to advance its interests.

He also demonstrated that he was an American by embracing the country's traditional ideas and arguing against the scourge of communism. In addition, he attempted to make the case that American political philosophy was the right philosophy for Mexico. He used his priests as an effective manager to make the case that the problems in Mexico would effect both Catholics and Protestants. These attempts by Drossaerts to accept American values and reach out to Protestants foreshadows what will happen at Vatican II in the 1960s.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Baltimore was the first erected diocese and archdiocese in the United States and until 1939 Washington DC was included in the Archdiocese.
- <sup>2</sup> Best represented in the formation of political or social parties, such as the Know Nothings and the Ku Klux Klan and the immigration quotes instituted to keep out Catholic people from Europe.
- <sup>3</sup> Published in 1891, this encyclical began the Roman Church's campaign to promote the ideas and teachings of helping the poor through Catholic Social Justice that continue under Pope Francis.
- <sup>4</sup> David C. Bailey. *Viva Cristo! The Cristero Rebellion and the Church State Conflict in Mexico* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1974, 10-16.
- <sup>5</sup> Article 130 of the "Constitution of Mexico" Organization of American States website, [http://www.oas.org/juridico/mla/en/mex/en\\_mex-int-text-const.pdf](http://www.oas.org/juridico/mla/en/mex/en_mex-int-text-const.pdf), accessed July 14th, 2015.
- <sup>6</sup> Article 24.
- <sup>7</sup> Article 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Published in 1885 it defended the idea that the Church must be given special preferences and needed to influence the leadership of the State. This encyclical was cited in *Rerum Novarum*.
- <sup>9</sup> While considered schismatic (and heretical by some) by Catholics, in general, it still maintained a similar type of hierarchy and kept many of the same beliefs as the Roman Church.
- <sup>10</sup> Adrian A. Bantjes discusses in his "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929-1940," the theory that the Enlightenment and French Revolution motivated the Mexican leftist to overthrow the Church and strip it of its traditional political rights. Additionally, he examines the links between the Mexican revolution to France and Russia but also discusses how the Mexican one differed from those two in its struggle with the Catholic Church.
- <sup>11</sup> While he was President only from December 1, 1924-November 30, 1928, he remained extremely powerful in Mexican politics before and after his administration.
- <sup>12</sup> Ben Fallaw. "The Seduction of Revolution: Anticlerical Campaigns against Confession in Mexico, 1914-1935." *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 01, (February, 2013): 102.
- <sup>13</sup> "Calles Drives Mexicans Out, Bishop Claims," 16.

- <sup>14</sup> The diocese of San Antonio would still be apart of the Catholic Province of New Orleans until August 3, 1926. On that date, the Pope issued the Bull *Pastoris Aeterni*, which elevated San Antonio to an archdiocese and placed all the other dioceses in Texas and Oklahoma under its care, except for El Paso, which remained apart of the Diocese of Santa Fe, NM.
- <sup>15</sup> Carlos E. Castañeda *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936* Austin, TX: Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, Vol. VII., 1958, 155, 478-479.
- <sup>16</sup> "Nine Exiled Prelates to Confer on Mexico," 3.
- <sup>17</sup> Pius XI *Iniquis Afflictisque* (1926) Accessed June 8, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_18111926\\_iniquis-afflictisque.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_18111926_iniquis-afflictisque.html).
- <sup>18</sup> "Mexican Attacks Deplored by Pope," 3.